Perspectives of Service Providers on Program Churn and its Impacts on Persons Exiting Prison

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Definitions

➢ Incarcerated person: This presentation refers to incarcerated person(s), rather than inmate, prisoner, offender, etc.

➢ Returning citizen: This presentation refers to returning citizen, instead of ex-inmate, ex-offender, former inmate, former offender, etc.

➢ Program churn: The cycle of funding programs for a limited time, the defunding of said programs, and the reinstitution of new programs, rather than continuous support

'The labels we give them – inmate, prisoner, offender… are so powerful and they take them on themselves' (SP 8)

Tasmania's program churn

2003: XCELL

2007: Transitional Support Model for ex-Prisoners (TSMP) and the Parolees' Transitional Accommodation Project (PTAP)

2008: Post-Release Options Program (PROP)

2011: Reintegration for Ex-Offenders' Program (REO)

2015: Intensive Tenancy Support Services (ITSS)

From 2016 nothing, until…

2018: Beyond the Wire

7 programs in 15 years

Methodology

➢ Emerged as an unexpected theme during the examination of a Tasmanian case study where a successful program (REO) that provided transitional and accommodation to returning citizens, was suddenly defunded and removed

➢ Narrated through the voices of eleven people closely associated with the program and the reintegration sector in Tasmania

➢ Purposive snowball sampling

➢ Semi-structured interviews

➢ Thematic analysis – data categorisations by identifying groups impacted by program churn (incarcerated persons, service providers, and the wider community)

Questions arose

➢ What happens in the interim between programs?

➢ What are the consequences on incarcerated persons, workers, and the community?

➢ What are the underlying factors to program churn?

➢ What would contribute to future sustainability of reintegration programs?

'By not having a strong commitment to people, we are actually creating a bigger problem' (SP 5)

What happens in the interim

➤ **Gap in service provision: lack of support and unmet needs**

When programs are defunded, workers would continue to support returning citizens 'out of the goodness of their hearts' (SP 4), as it was recognised that if support 'services had just gone and shut the door – those people [who need intensive support] wouldn't have survived' (SP 2)

➤ **Loss of resources**

Refunding programs 'is a waste of money' (SP 6) and 'doesn't make any sense at all, financially' (SP 10)

Energy, thought and time: each time a new program is started up, 'you've got to do it again' (SP 5)

Consequences: Service providers

➢ **Loss of human capital**

Programs move to another organisation: 'If the delivery of a program moves from one organisation to the other, I think there is a loss of human capital – an experience built up within the first agency – that is lost' (SP 4)

People in organisations move on: flow-on effect on relationships that organisations 'have been able to build with housing providers, and employment, and vocational training providers is lost' (SP 6)

➢ **Loss of relationships and trust**

Within and between organisations: 'You lose those sorts of connections and that takes a long time to actually developed good, trusting professional working relationships' (SP 2)

New program: 'Have to go through a process of seeking people to develop the networks' (SP 3)

➢ **Cynicism**

New programs have 'to work a little bit harder to prove that it is going to last' (SP 8)

Consequences: Service providers

➤ **Disengagement and burnout**

'…have a vocation, so they want to help, and they'll stretch themselves and they'll do more than they're capable of doing' (SP 3)

People who work in this sector are 'prepared to make the commitment long-term' (SP 4)

'It is one of the risks in this job, is to take some of that on yourself, and to feel so disheartened about this business that you just give up or become cynical. It's hard' (SP 8)

'A large component of burnout is this – I can't get anywhere' (SP 5)

Consequences: Incarcerated persons

➢ **Lack of support: needs not met**

'Why put a service in that can't actually meet the need of a participant? Because to set someone up to fail is absolute neglect and the consequences of that can be little, but they can be severe' (SP 5)

➢ **Relationship breakdown and loss of trust** between organisations and 'the actual community we are trying to serve' (SP 5)

They 'have to start again with a new case manager' and 'they don't want to do that… they feel cheated and left out. Like someone's left them' (SP 11)

Biggest consequences is the loss of trust in a community that has been 'let down time and time again' (SP 8) and have been 'completely failed by [the system]' (SP 5)

Consequences: Incarcerated persons

➢ **Continued failure and perpetuated marginalisation**

A lifetime of trauma, failure, and incarceration cannot be undone in a short period of time. Need assistance to 'unpack it, sort it out, and deal with it' (SP 2)

'Another failure' (SP 5) and 'an opportunity to say, "I told you" (SP 8)

➢ **Perpetuation of stigma**

'Identity is really big… The labels we give them – inmate, prisoner, offender… are so powerful and they take them on themselves' (SP 8)

Social stigma and the difficulties of exiting prison particularly difficult in Tasmania because 'everybody knows everybody' (SP 4)

Difficult to get 'away from their previous cohort or their peer group' (SP 3)

Consequences: Incarcerated persons

➢ **Limited opportunities for housing and employment**

'If you want to rent a property in Tasmania, you have to provide a police report to particular real estate agents' and 'if you want to get a job, you'll be asked for your police report' (SP 5)

➢ **Ultimately, programs are ineffective without ongoing funding, which comes down to a lack of commitment**

'So, by starting programs and defunding them, and starting and defunding them, or changing the name, or waiting a couple of years – it's basically just saying we don't have a commitment to this.' (SP 5)

Factors: Funding

➤ **Short-term funding and competitive tendering**

'The more resources you have, the more quality work you can do' (SP 3)

'Short term funding and competitive tendering stifles so much good work' (SP 4)

'In the NGO sector, we're used to two-year funding cycles. They're silly. It's a change of Minister, it's a change of Head of the Department, it's a change of the Director of the prison, it's a change of whatever' (SP 5)

'It does make it hard for programs to, not only operate well, but to plan for the future if they don't have any funding certainty' (SP 1)

➤ Short-term funding identified as factor for ineffective service provision in other sectors (Brackerts, Fotheringham & Winter, 2016)

Factors: Tough on crime ⬄ fear of crime

➢ **Tough on crime – lack of commitment**

'This all gets back to a lack of education from the general public, [who] vote in our members, [who] have short-term interests' (SP 5)

Government would 'rather spend a lot of money being tough on crime than actually try and address the problem: the causes of crime' (SP 3)

➢ **Fear of crime**

Othering:

'There is a huge fear factor and so much ignorance around, it is incredible' (SP 9)

'I think that they like to think of people who commit offence as 'the other'. They are 'the other, I am not like that' (SP 8)

Lack of education and representation in the media

'Completely inaccurate' (SP 8); 'The way the media reports crime is appalling' (SP 7); 'If it bleeds, it leads. Be shocking' (SP 5)

Lack of education, fear of crime and othering, result in punitive attitudes which further lead to policy decisions that are not evidence-based, but rather to 'please their electorate' (SP 5)

Program sustainability

➤ **Ongoing funding**

Best people for the job: 'People in this area would like to get their teeth into this sort of work for three, four, five, six years. So, to get those people you have to offer them something better than two years' of funding' (SP 4)

Shift from competitive tendering: 'Should not be tendered out […] if the company has proven themselves in the past, then they've got the job' (SP 11)

Quality, not quantity: 'Quality is the only thing that really ensures us any success' (SP 2)

➤ **Change of attitudes**

'Everybody has to have a change of attitude. I don't understand why we don't just look back at history and say, "Well, what we're doing isn't working" (SP 5).

'Politicians need to be saying to people, "We are going to be smart on crime. Not tough on crime" (SP 7)

Questions?

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